NEW HANOVER COUNTY SCHOOLS

Dr. Christopher Barnes
Superintendent

Jennifer Geller
Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Barnes, Superintendent
From: Ashley Sutton, Chief Financial Officer
Jennifer Geller, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources
Date: September 21, 2026
Re: Occupational Therapist and Physical Therapist Pay Structure Proposal

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The purpose of this memorandum is to present joint recommendations from the Finance and Human Resources Divisions, as directed by the Superintendent, regarding proposed adjustments to the salary structures for Occupational Therapists (OTs) and Physical Therapists (PTs).

These recommendations are intended to strengthen the district's ability to recruit and retain employees serving students with disabilities while establishing compensation structures that more appropriately reflect educational and professional qualifications, job responsibilities, internal pay alignment, and the intensity and complexity of services provided to students.

Occupational Therapist and Physical Therapist Salary Structure

The proposed salary structure for Occupational Therapists and Physical Therapists considers several factors that distinguish these positions from other classified positions and warrant modification of their current placement within the district compensation structure.

Occupational and physical therapy are highly specialized professional fields requiring substantial postsecondary education, clinical preparation, and professional licensure. Entry-level occupational therapy preparation is generally at the master's or doctoral level and North Carolina Board of Occupational Therapy (NCBOT), while contemporary entry-level physical therapy preparation is at the doctoral level through the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) with North Carolina Board of Physical Therapy licensure (NCBOPT).

School-based therapists must also maintain the professional licensure required by the State of North Carolina to practice within their respective disciplines. These requirements distinguish OT and PT positions from traditional classified positions because employment is dependent upon advanced professional preparation, specialized clinical expertise, and maintenance of an external professional license.

The district continues to experience significant challenges recruiting and retaining qualified Occupational Therapists and Physical Therapists. The limited supply of appropriately credentialed professionals, combined with competition from hospitals, private practices, rehabilitation providers, health care organizations, contract agencies, and other school systems, creates a highly competitive labor market.

Staffing challenges have also increased the district's reliance on contracted OT and PT services. While contracted services allow the district to maintain required services when permanent positions cannot be filled, they can result in increased expenditures and reduced continuity of services.

Increasing the competitiveness of district-employed OT and PT positions should therefore be considered both a workforce strategy and a cost-management strategy. A competitive salary structure may improve recruitment and retention, decrease reliance on contracted providers, and strengthen continuity of services for students.

Proposed OT/PT Pay Structure

The proposed salary structure is included as Supporting Document A — Proposed Occupational Therapist and Physical Therapist Salary Schedule and is based on the following methodology:

1. Separate OT Salary Table and PT Salary Table. Establish a dedicated salary schedule applicable only to Occupational Therapist and Physical Therapist positions.
2. For OT step 0 alignment. Establish step 0 at the equivalent step 0 compensation level for a certified teacher with a master's degree and NCBOT.
3. For PT step 0 alignment. Establish Step 0 at the equivalent Step 0 compensation level for a certified teacher with a doctoral degree and NCBOPT.
4. Initial 7.8% Adjustment. The proposed salary structure reflects an initial 7.8% increase from the current Grade 78 salary scale, improving the competitiveness of district OT and PT compensation.
5. 1% Step Progression. Each successive step reflects a 1% increase from the preceding step, consistent with the step differential methodology used for classified staff compensation.
6. Creditable Experience. Employees will be placed on the OT/PT salary table according to district-approved years of relevant professional experience.

This approach creates a transparent and predictable salary progression while recognizing the advanced professional preparation, licensure requirements, specialized responsibilities, and competitive labor market associated with OT and PT positions.